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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARONITE LEAGUE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SLEIMAN

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The president of the Maronite League, Joseph Torbey, and fellow prominent Maronite leaders enthusiastically expressed their support for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Citing the problems the next president will face as "Lebanese problems, not Maronite problems," they told the Ambassador on November 29 they believe Sleiman's experience heading the multi-confessional army best enables him to meet the Lebanon's confessional challenges. Sleiman is also well-poised to manage Lebanon's problems with Hizballah's arms and with Syria because of his background. Equally important, he enjoys widespread support among the Christian community.

2. (C) The Maronite leaders were hesitant about Parliament moving forward with the next scheduled parliamentary vote on November 30, believing they need approximately two weeks to fully understand Sleiman's program and to consolidate March 14's position. (Note: the November 30 parliament session has been rescheduled to December 7. End note). They repeated throughout the meeting that the announcement of Sleiman as president will embarrass and subsequently weaken opposition figures Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun, a Maronite, and Hizballah. They stated confidently that Aoun's popular demonstrations, planned to begin on December 3, will not amount to anything, and ultimately he will not prevent Parliament from voting. End summary.

SLEIMAN WORKS WELL WITH ALL CONFESSIONS

3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, visited Maronite League president (and potential presidential candidate himself) Joseph Torbey, former Ambassador to the U.S. Abdallah Bouhabib, Ambassador Samir Hobeica, and Fady Abboud, head of the Industrialists' Association, at the Maronite League's headquarters on November 29. Torbey opened the meeting saying the problems the president will face are not only Maronite problems, but affect the nation as a whole. These include the Special Tribunal to investigate former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination, Hizballah's arms, and relations

with Syria. Solutions to these problems require negotiations with all confessional communities, Torbey continued. Bouhabib added that they, as Maronites, bear part of the responsibility for the situation Lebanon is in today, but the problems are "too many for a Maronite to solve himself; the president needs to be able to work with everyone."

¶4. (C) The four men then launched into what was the strongest show of support we have seen regarding the March 14's announced support for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as the next president, taking turns to list his strengths and the advantages of a Sleiman presidency. According to Torbey, Sleiman's strength lies in his experience managing the multi-confessional army. This success earns him favor among the three religious communities, and bodes well for his potential to work constructively as president with the Lebanon's various confessions. Hobeica added that Sleiman, of his own volition, will seek out positive relationships with the West.

¶5. (C) Abboud believed it is most important that the majority of the Maronites have been happy with Sleiman. He referred to the psychological benefit Sleiman brings to the Maronites - a powerful Christian in uniform appeased what he dubbed as a Maronite "inferiority complex." Torbey chimed in that the image Sleiman, 59, conveys is a huge improvement in comparison to the octogenarian presidential candidates Michel Khoury and Michel Edde.

¶6. (C) Torbey said that Sleiman's experience serving as head of the army is an asset to the presidency because in that capacity he has daily communication with Syria and Hizballah. The president, he believes, needs to be able to talk to these players. The four Maronite leaders trust Sleiman to manage the opposition both today, when it is suspicious of March 14, and in the future, because he is a "wise man who

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knows how to deal with them."

CALLING THE OPPOSITION'S BLUFF

¶7. (C) The four Maronites are not clear on the opposition's position regarding Sleiman's candidacy. They acknowledged that the opposition is likely confused about the major change in direction March 14 is pursuing. They do not believe the opposition (specifically, Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun and Hizballah) will block a vote for Sleiman. They believe they can afford to take two weeks time to sit with Sleiman and inquire about his positions on the important issues and also to consolidate March 14's position. They suspect Sleiman has already spoken to the opposition on these issues. Nevertheless, they mused, if the opposition refuses to go to parliament, "we will be calling their bluff." This led into a sidebar discussion on the need to resolve the two-thirds quorum issue since both sides can currently use it to block a vote.

¶8. (C) One advantage of Sleiman that the four repeatedly stressed is that Aoun and Hizballah will be embarrassed. If they reject Sleiman's candidacy, they will lose popular support. Abboud believes that many of Aoun's supporters are not necessarily "Aounists," and that if Aoun opposes Sleiman, he will lose many of his supporters. Moreover, if the opposition rejects Sleiman, a candidate long opposed by March 14, it will signal that the opposition seeks only a vacuum. If Sleiman is elected, Torbey noted repeatedly, he will be able to "bring down Aoun and the Shia leadership."

¶9. (C) Abboud met with Aoun the previous day and noted that there were no businessmen or industry leaders consulting with him, suggesting that his popularity is waning. Abboud further added that Aoun does not have any sort of sound strategy for his efforts and so will wind up unsuccessful. However, Abboud could not conclude whether Aoun is bluffing

about his opposition to any candidate but himself. Changing his mind from earlier in the week, Abboud recommended the Ambassador meet with Aoun because someone needs to convince Aoun he will not be president. Abboud concluded that he does not understand why Aoun still retains support from a majority of the Christian community.

¶10. (C) In a visible weakening in his own previous support for Aoun, Bouhabib said that he indicated to Aoun that he opposes his plan for popular demonstrations, and Abboud followed up that he bluntly conveyed his disapproval to Aoun. Torbey downplayed the importance of the planned demonstrations, believing that will have little impact, especially as they will be kept in check by Sleiman's LAF.

#### PREDICTING A SHIFT IN PARLIAMENT

¶11. (C) All four of the Maronite leaders were unanimous in recommending that Sleiman fill the open cabinet positions in the government with civilians, preferably technocrats. Torbey envisions a new government altogether, expecting that many March 8 MPs will shift their allegiances to the president, citing MP Michel Murr's recent distancing from Aoun as an example, and Aoun's blocking minority will likely diminish. They lamented the current state of leadership, saying that they needed to develop a new class of leaders. Torbey said the Maronite League is a good breeding ground to produce a such a new class.

FELTMAN